**Chapter 25: Settlement (2)**

I took in my surroundings.

A dingy alleyway, where even the sun was shadowed by buildings.

Even as I ventured deeper, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss, yet those guys surprisingly followed me without resistance.

"Hey there, male. Stop right there."

"If you obey us, there won't be any bloodshed."

I shuddered in anger at the sound of their voices as they spouted the usual three-letter words.

"Nu, who are you?"

"You don't need to know who we are."

Thwack-.

They drew sharp daggers from their loins.

[Zelvin LV.11]

[Mercy LV.9]

Though they posed no particular threat.

"Hee. Hee."

I reacted with surprise.

If there's one thing I've learned from my battles with Deluna, it's this little psychological tactic.

The more I look like shit, the easier it is to catch them off guard.

In a way, it's a tactic I can use now that I have a status window

"Ha, look at that surprised reaction. Quite talented at making one's uterus twist."

"If the helmet reveals something decent, I could sell him off as a slave or a prostitute."

"You fool. Why would a man cover his face? He probably looks messed up."

"That's true. But with a good body like that, there should be plenty of demand."

Seeing them already plotting how to deal with me, it seems my act of being easily intimidated is working well.

They laugh confidently as they gradually approach.

The opponent brandishes a sharp weapon, threateningly shouting about rape or selling me as a slave.

To facilitate smooth communication, I brought out the right tool for conversation.

'At this point, it's self-defense, right?'

With justification in place, all that's left is to swing the axe.

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"Help, help, help⋯"

Zelvin, who has axe marks all over her body, begged, wringing her hands.

Beside her was Mercy, her supposed companion, but she was not begging as fervently as Zelvin.

Her thighs had been axed, and she'd passed out immediately afterward, her eyes rolling back in her head.

I asked, pointing the axe at the stunned Zelvin.

"Why did you come after me? Were you trying to avenge Deluna? What the hell are you guys doing? Who told you to come after me?"

"Who told you?! What kind of bullshit are you talking about?"

"Heh. You're trying to play dumb?"

I raised the confession dispenser towards Zelvin, who was looking at me with a bewildered expression on her face.

With a little tingling pressure, the man or woman will tell me the answer I want to hear.

"Now, wait, I'll tell you!"

I shove the confession dispenser into the nape of her neck, and she immediately opens her mouth, her face a deep blue.

It works.

"It's only natural for a woman to think of eating a man when she sees one⋯"

I don't think so, since she's just talking nonsense. I guess I need to poke her harder to get a better effect.

"Who told you to say that? I asked you who made you do it."

“If you want to find the one who made you do it, it's our womb. We just wanted to see what we could do with you out of the kindness of our hearts⋯"

"⋯⋯what?"

Something is wrong.

Aside from the fact that her words make my head spin, I feel like the conversation from earlier is disjointed and off-kilter.

"You didn't come to retaliate for Deluna's corpse because she had the same puppet curse⋯you just followed me?”

I carefully mouthed the name of the curse.

"Puppet."

"⋯?"

"The 86574th puppet, that’s you, with 88574."

"⋯?"

Zelvin's face turned even dumber. Like she didn't understand what I was saying in the slightest.

"Puppets⋯? You mean puppet shows? If so, they sometimes perform on the streets in the Outlaw District. I often go to see them because they're fun."

"No, not that shitty show-"

Just as my frustration was about to rise to the top of my head, a possibility flashed through my mind.

‘These assholes. They don’t realize they're cursed?’

But I quickly shake my head.

‘No. How could they not know?’

It's not just because I have a status window.

Once an explorer or whatever heads into the Labyrinth, there's a small chance they'll be blessed or cursed. The Labyrinth blesses and curses everyone equally.

Blessings and curses are confirmed at the Temple.

Explorers usually check for curses after each trip to the Labyrinth, so it's impossible to tell if you're cursed.

When I worked at Diana's Inn, I'd hear drunken adventurers blabbing about what curse they'd gotten today and how their lives would be ruined.

‘Well, there are some cases like my question mark blessing, but I don't think the puppet curse is one of them.’

The question mark blessing didn't even show up in the status window.

The puppet's curse, on the other hand, was detailed like a normal blessing or curse.

Then it should show up in the temple's appraisal.

‘Appraise and not tell them?’

Serif would immediately write down the results on a piece of paper for others to see.

But do all priests do that?

I remembered Adolf's face. With one exiled for sodomy, would all the priests follow the rules?

Can I be sure that among all those priests, there isn't a single puppet?

I mean, aren't blessings and curses bestowed in the Labyrinth in the first place?

What and whose puppets are they in the first place? The puppets of the Labyrinth, or someone else? A group? An organization?

'⋯No, that's too much of a leap. Let's stay cool.'

The thought of an enemy instantly fills me with worry.

I take a deep breath and clear my head.

Anyway, she didn't seem to know when or where she'd gotten the puppet curse, much like I did when I got the question mark blessing.

Putting aside what I couldn't figure out right away, I'd see what I could find out.

"You two are outlaws, right?"

From the sound of it, this was no ordinary explorer.

I pressed down hard on the confession dispenser, and the answer popped right out.

"Yes, I am."

"Then how come you were sitting in the Explorers' Alliance?"

"The buildings of the Explorers' Alliance are only forbidden to the branded. So unless you're a known outlaw or a wanted man, you're allowed to stop by for a visit, but I'm not one of them."

Zelvin pulled a wooden plaque with an unusual engraving from her bosom.

"I was an outlaw. I'm in the process of rehabilitation, and I've been doing well until now, when you tempted me with your body! Eek!"

When I asked her about the rehabilitation process, she explained that it's a way for people who have left the outlaw life behind to kiss the Alliance’s ass and get a new identity in order to become explorers again.

"The stamp on the plaque is proof that I’m a reformed explorer."

‘The Explorers' Union. What a bunch of money-crazed bastards.’

How is this any different than a criminal wearing an electronic anklet paying the police to remove it?

"So, by any chance, do you know about this woman named Deluna?"

"Oh. I do. She was my classmate in the rehabilitation program. She graduated first because she was a fast learner and didn't commit any crimes along the way, but apparently she fell back into crime again."

"And you know about the Blues Clan she was in?"

"Blues? There's no way I could forget those bastards. They're notorious for dirty dealings in the western lawless zone. They're the kind of scum who default to slave hunting."

Zelvin gritted his teeth in exasperation.

"Especially that clan matriarch. Her name is Vesta, and she used to be a sixteenth floor explorer."

Sixteen floors is pretty deep, even for a mid-level.

- Do you know who's above me? Huh?! No!

I had assumed that Deluna's dying words were spoken because she knew who the puppet master was but her words, and her lack of awareness of the curse, made me change my mind.

'Is she just being a bit of a bully for her clan?’

- That's what slaves are for. That's what Vesta gave her to me to do.

Come to think of it, didn't Grumpy also say that Vesta gave her to Deluna.

"Ma, I've said all I need to say. Now put the axe away⋯ we were wrong⋯"

Zelvin sounded desperate, as if she wanted to be left alone.

The interrogation hadn't yielded much. I felt like I had to get something to fill the void.

"If you're guilty, you should compensate the victims. Let's settle amicably with ten silver coins."

"Pee, we're the only ones who were harmed, that's bullshit, and we don't have that kind of money!"

"What, you want to start the rehab process all over again?"

"⋯No, what kind of thug are you-?"

"What, you want to go back to being an outlaw?”

I pointed the axe at her, and Zelvin looked at me with a look that said, "What kind of asshole are you?”

"⋯Cough, you're sure you'll shut me up if I gave it, right?"

"Think about it."

"Kaaaagh, let go of me, you devil!"

It was a waste to let these guys go already.

There was no immediate information to be gained, but they were cursed.

I finally compromised and settled for five silver coins, mutually agreeable, and just enough to know where they live to investigate their curse further if I had the means.

"⋯Sad Cat Inn. Room 105. Mercy lives there."

"If you’ve changed residences the next time I visit, something interesting is going to happen."

"⋯⋯You devil."

With that, I raised my axe, and she scurried off with Mercy in tow.

I stared at them, thinking.

What do they have in common with Deluna?

All three were reformed explorers.

‘In other words, all three were outlaws in the past.’

If I had to guess with the information I have now.

There's something in the outlaw territory in the west and it's damn dangerous.

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The next day, I, Jermi, and Grumpy met at the Explorers' Union to settle our paychecks.

I couldn't help but pinch myself on the back of the neck as soon as I saw her walk through the door.

"Grumpy."

"What?"

I called out to him in a shaky voice, and she looked up at me with a puzzled expression on her face.

[Currently enslaved]

[Denshi LV.7]

[Blessings and Curses currently held by Denshi: 3]

[◆ Curse of the 1389th Puppet]

- Denshi became the 1389th puppet.

- All stats +1 when maximum conditions are met

"You. What the hell are you wearing⋯?"

"????"

Grumpy wore a face full of skepticism at the simple question.